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Dawna Taylor

Maricopa County Parks and Recreation
Department spokeswoman

Recapturing Agua Fria's OASIS



MARICOPA COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

On July 1, the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department closed the gates to motor vehicles entering the area of Lake Pleasant fed by the Agua Fria River. Officials have begun a new focus on enforcement in the conservation area in response to the growing number of visitors trashing the preserve.

Public hearings seek input on long-term plan to better protect battered conservation area

By Ryan Kost

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Just outside the sizzling black roads and concrete buildings that make up the Phoenix metro area lies Lake Pleasant.

It's our own veritable oasis in our baked backyard – a natural lake, not one we manually shoved into desert clay. At the tip of Lake Pleasant is a small inlet fed by the Agua Fria River. So inherent is the beauty and importance of this little slice of land where river meets lake that in 1995 Maricopa County deemed it a land conservation area, in hopes of keeping it pristine.

Instead, we discovered it in droves.

We descended with camping gear, guns, boats and all-terrain vehicles. We chopped down trees for fire, ground our wheels into the banks and left behind mementos of rotten trash, dead cattle and networks of unplanned trails.

The abuse reached a tipping point this summer. On July 1, the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department closed the gates to motor vehicles. It's a step, spokeswoman Dawna Taylor says, toward safeguarding the battered conservation area.

To that end, the department is holding three public hearings this month to get community feedback on a long-term plan for the protected area. Officials will release the department's definition of "conservation area" and hope to hear what kinds of activities visitors want to be able to do in the area. Whether vehicles will be allowed may still be off the table, Taylor said. Technically, they were never supposed to be there; the same goes for the shooting and the all-terrain vehicles.

"It's declining rapidly," she says. "People are pretty much destroying the natural resources back there."



Public meetings

The Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department is hosting public meetings to discuss appropriate uses of the conservation area. The meeting schedule is as follows:

■ Thursday and Sept. 12, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., at the Desert Outdoor Center at Lake Pleasant, 41402 N. 87th Ave. in Peoria. Details: (602) 372-7470.

■ Sept. 17, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., Albino Civic Center, 19005 E. K-Mine Road Center in Black Canyon City. Details: (623) 374-5234.

County efforts to protect a pristine inlet at the tip of Lake Pleasant backfired as vacationers descended in droves.